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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings on the relationship between the social psychological dimension, students' self concept, and the students' future educational plans. The authors used a scale which measures whether an individual's self-concept is characterized by a mastery over his personal life or by a sense of futuristic fatalism. The research findings reported are based upon survey data obtained from over 3,300 students from Dade County, Florida, 930 graduating junior college students and 2,453 high school students. The results indicate that, excepting for some minority group students, the self-concept of high school seniors and junior college graduates is positively associated with their parent's socioeconomic status (as measured by income). It was also found that the more positive a student's self-image, the more likely he is to have "long-range" educational plans. The authors conclude that research could be profitably undertaken to further examine the relationship between the self-concept of high school-age students and their educational plans and careers. (Author/BW)

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SELF-CONCEPT AND STUDENTS' FUTURE EDUCATIONAL PLANS

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SELF-CONCEPT AND STUDENTS' FUTURE EDUCATIONAL PLANS*

In the past decade, there has been a definite rekindling of interest in the relationship between self-concept and behavior among social scientists. This is especially true among those interested in students' plans and achievements. Whereas the development of empirical indicators of social-psychological phenomena is probably partially responsible for this increased interest, agreement has arisen among many educational researchers interested in long-range, goal-oriented behavior that there is a theoretical need for such an integrating construct.[1] For example, there is considerable evidence in the literature to demonstrate the impact of socio-economic origins and academic ability on students' post-high school plans and achievements.[2] In addition to the influence of these background factors, certain social-psychological dimensions are also acquired differentially by students. Together these factors influence students' educational aspirations and attainments. In this paper, we present recent findings on the relationship between one of these social psychological dimensions, students' self-concept, and the students' future educational plans.

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*This is an abbreviated version of a paper to be submitted by the authors for publication. The data are taken from the Miami-Dade Student Survey (spring, 1970) conducted by the Institute for Social Research at Florida State University and directed by the first author.

Conceptualization and Measurement

The authors view self-concept as a product of the socialization process, especially as it operates in the home, school and neighborhood. Our current analysis, however, is not of the emergence of self-concept, but rather of how it affects behavior once developed. Therefore, we adopt the conceptual position that a student's self-concept has become a relatively stable personality component by the time he reaches senior high school. This is not to argue that self-concept is immutable beyond this age, nor to endorse a position approaching an "attitude-first" (self-concept-first!) stance. Our position is generally congruent with Parsons' recent work on self-image wherein he sees it as a stable or "fixed sub-system of personality.[3]

Self-concept is viewed, then, as a social-psychological phenomenon through which structural and contextual factors (i.e., those factors usually treated as independent variables such as SES) affect behavior. More specifically, we adopt and partially test the position that self-concept is an intervening variable between background factors and educational career plans. Hence we are arguing that a student's self-concept, once established, operates as an important independent factor affecting in-school achievement and post-graduation aspirations and plans.

A number of theoretical discussions and empirical studies suggest that this conceptual framework might be utilized in the context of educational career choices, i.e., whether or not to attend college and, if so, what kind of school to attend. Rosenberg (1965) demonstrated that

self-concept significantly affects students' occupational choice and their participation in extracurricular activities.[4] In the same year, Brookover found a strong association between self-concept and student achievement.[5] The following year, in his widely publicized and influential study of educational opportunities, Coleman argued that not only are self-perceptions affected by such things as parents' socioeconomic status, but they are important in determining academic achievement, in and of themselves.[6]

Self-concept can be measured in a number of ways. We view self-concept as comprised of analytically distinct dimensions or a series of "selves." This is essentially the conceptualization of Cottrell who, among others, has argued that a multi-dimensional concept of self facilitates the integration of current findings with earlier findings and with other theoretical frameworks.[7] The authors used a scale developed by Campbell and his associates. It measures whether an individual's self-concept is characterized by a mastery over his personal life or by a sense of futuristic fatalism.[8] Each scale item consists of a statement about one's self to which the respondent reacts by checking one of four responses: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree. The analysis reported here makes use of the respondent's total score. Interpretation of the resulting scale is simple: the higher an individual's score, the greater his self-confidence.[9]

The Survey

The research findings reported here are based upon survey data

obtained from over 3,300 students from Dade County (Miami), Florida: 930 graduating junior college students and 2,453 high school seniors. The questions to which students were asked to respond concerning their future educational plans were timely; the data were collected late in the spring term several weeks before graduation.

The junior college population consisted of 1,312 associate degree registrants at Miami-Dade Junior College--Florida's largest two-year school. A questionnaire was mailed to each student. Two follow-up letters were mailed to non-respondents. The receipt of 930 usable questionnaires represents a 72 percent response rate. A follow-up on non-respondents showed that they were not atypical of respondents.

The high school population consisted of the nearly 14,000 public school seniors in Dade County. A one-in-five (20 percent) proportionate random sample was drawn and trained fieldworkers administered the questionnaires in each preselected class. Attrition was minimal; most of it occurred due to absenteeism or incomplete questionnaires. Disproportionate degrees of neither were found at any school or any one of the six county school districts.

The questionnaire used for both student groups was essentially the same. It consisted of approximately 75 items, and, in addition to reporting their actual future educational plans and the schools they chose to attend (if any), students provided information on their family socioeconomic status, perceived sources of influence with respect to their educational careers, choice of major subject, etc. The junior college and high school questionnaires were pretested at another Florida public

junior college and in the Dade County parochial school system, respectively. The scale items which comprised the measure of students' self-concept were included as the last questions on both questionnaires. Virtually all of the students (99 percent) completed these questions.

Primary Relationship

Our data support the treatment of self-concept as an intervening mechanism between parental socioeconomic status (here measured by income) and students' educational career plans. Table I reveals that as parental income increases, student self-concept also increases. Tests for significance indicate that the observed differences between several pairs of means are significant at the .05 level. In both the junior college population and the high school sample, self-concept is postively associated with parental income.

((TABLE I HERE))

Prior to data analysis, we hypothesized that there would be a similar relationship between self-concept and college plans to that found between parental income and self-concept: as self-concept increases, college plans become more "long-range." Table II indicates that this is the case. As shown, the mean self-concept score for high school students ranges from a low of 14.02 for those who expect to drop out of school to a high of 16.25 for those planning to go directly to a four year college or university. The means for those expecting to drop out or to stop after high school are not significantly different from one another.[10] Similarly, the three means of the categories including students who plan to acquire four years of college are not significantly different from one another. The means of

those planning vocational school and those planning to stop after two years at junior college are not significantly different from each other.

((TABLE II HERE))

We suggest, on the basis of these findings, and in terms of students' self-concept, that there are three groups among high schoolers: (1) those who plan no post-high school education; (2) those who plan to get some vocational training after graduating from high school or to finish their education with a junior college degree; and (3) those who plan four years or more of college beyond high school. The data for the junior college graduates show the same pattern between the second and third categories.[11]

The reader has probably noticed while looking at Tables I and II that mean self-concept scores for junior college degree candidates appear consistently higher than the scores for the high school seniors. Table III confirms this observation. Some authors have suggested that such observed differences are due to the fact that successfully completing additional years of schooling causes students to have more positive self-image.[12] Whereas, at first glance, this might appear to apply with regard to our respondents, a closer look at the data suggests an alternative interpretation.

((TABLE III HERE)

The mean self-concept score for high school seniors who plan to go on to junior college is 15.69. Comparing this mean to the overall mean for the junior college cohort (15.84), we find that the difference is not statistically significant. We suggest that what is occurring is a process of selection: students with higher self-concepts proceed through the educational system, while students with lower self-concepts select

themselves out of the system. Trent and Medsker, among others, argue that student motivation is a factor often related to both entrance and persistance in post-secondary schools.[13] Our results appear to be complementary to theirs.[14] Research utilizing longitudinal designs is required before we can make more conclusive statements regarding this selection phenomenon. Nevertheless, we feel that our data support the conceptualization of a relatively fixed self-concept which plays a significant role in determining students' educational plans.

Self Concept and Campus Choice

Different colleges and universities provide different campus activities in addition to different academic climates. In other analysis of the Miami-Dade Student Survey data, we found that students were aware of differences in the services provided by college, and that this awareness affected their choice of college and major.[15] How, if at all, do students' self-concepts affect their choices of college activities? In general, our data (Table IV) show no significant relationships between self-concept and particular campus "extra-curricula" activities. There are, however, two interesting exceptions. For the high school seniors, the only statistically significant difference is one between the low mean self-concept score of students interested in activities concerning future careers and the relatively high score of students interested in social activities and sports. Turning to the junior college degree candidates, the only statistically significant difference is between the low mean score of students interested in getting to know others and the high score of those interested in campus political activities and activities directly related to the students future careers!

((TABLE IV HERE))

Earlier in this paper, we argued that the difference between high school and junior college students' plans is partially the result of a selection process. Therefore, it seems reasonable that there would be some lack of similarity in the activities sought by the two groups of students. It appears, for example, that students with positive self-images and interests in social activities and sports will enter junior colleges less frequently after high school. On the other hand, high school students with high self-concepts and interests in business activities are more likely to enter junior colleges. Our tentative explanation appears to be congruent to a prevalent image of the junior college as an institution which is particularly attractive to students interested in business and vocational careers and of four year universities as institutions especially attractive to students who anticipate social activities and sporting events.

Self-Concept and the Plans of Minority Students

The self-concept of minority group students and the role it plays in academic achievement and persistence in school is a topic of increasing interest to students of education. Our sample contained a number of Black and Spanish-speaking students.[16] In analyses presented elsewhere, it was demonstrated that as family income rises, the demand for local two year colleges and universities tend to decrease. For the Black and Spanish-speaking students in our sample, the demand for a local college appears unrelated to parental income. In other words, minority group students, regardless of their parental income, register an even stronger

preference for attending local colleges than do students in general. Interestingly, self-concept appears to be related to their preference (Table V).

((TABLE V HERE))

Table V shows the preferences of minority group students for local and non-local colleges according to their self-concepts. It is clear that the relationship between self-concept and the location of students' "first choice" college is similar for high school and junior college degree candidates. Black and Spanish-speaking students who select local, metropolitan Miami, schools have a lower self-concept than those students who choose to leave the area to continue their education. For both groups of high school seniors, the mean self-concept score of students selecting local two year community colleges is lower than the score of those choosing a local four year university, and it is lower still than the self-image of seniors who plan to attend college outside the metropolitan area. The differences between those selecting local junior colleges as a first choice and those selecting non-local, in-state colleges is statistically significant for both minority group students. Table V also shows that Black and Spanish-speaking junior college graduates who plan to transfer to non-local colleges and universities have more positive self-concepts than their classmates who plan to transfer to a local school. Again, these differences are statistically significant.[17]

Minority group responses reveal other interesting findings. For example, there are no significant differences between the mean self-concept scores of Black, Spanish-speaking and White junior college degree

registrants. Given the fact that the parental income of Black candidates is considerably less than that of the respondents parental incomes in general, we conclude that these "successful" students do not disproportionately come from middle and upper-middle class Black families, as one might expect. This finding lends support to our earlier argument for students in general: students with "poor" self-concepts drop out of the education system while those with positive self-concepts are more likely to obtain their degrees.

Minority Proximity and Plans

Spanish-speaking students are overrepresented in the group of students interested in "high-priced" colleges--particularly the University of Miami. Thirty-two percent of these junior college degree candidates plan to tranfer to Miami, whereas the total percentage of Spanish-speaking students in this population is 16.8. Examination of the parental incomes of Spanish-speaking students planning to attend the University of Miami showed that it is similar to the income for students in general. This is surprising since Miami is clearly a comparatively expensive school to attend. Similar examinations of the employment, reasons for staying in metropolitan Miami and preferred college activities of this student subgroup failed to show any significant differences from the general sample.

Two-thirds of the Spanish-speaking students interested in the University of Miami attend the South Campus of Miami-Dade Junior College--the campus closest to the University. We conclude that there are two plausible explanations for the overrepresentation of Spanish-speaking students in

the group of students interested in Miami: (1) Although the self-concepts of these degree candidates do not differ statistically from their classmates, Cuban-born students come from middle class and professional families. These families may very well encourage their offspring to attend a more expensive private university. (2) The proximity of the university to the Spanish-speaking urban neighborhoods and to the campus they currently attend attracts students to the University of Miami. These students apparently perceive substantial non-pecuniary benefits by living at home and commuting to a nearby college.

Our data suggest that similar relationships may hold for the Black junior college respondents.[18] Of those Black students who plan to continue their education beyond junior college, nearly two-thirds (64 percent) plan to attend a "local" (within 30 miles) college or university. One third of these students go to the University of Miami. Three fourths of the Black students attend the Miami-Dade North campus--the campus closest to the predominantly Black neighborhoods within the metropolitan area. The fact that a majority of students planning to go to Florida Atlantic University (north of metropolitan Miami) are from the North campus, again suggests the relative importance of proximity. On the whole, Black graduates are typical of the junior college student group, except that they tend to come from lower income families and more frequently plan to remain in the metropolitan area to continue their schooling.[19]

The importance of proximity of a local college as a determinant of student choice recurs throughout the analysis of the Miami-Dade Student

Survey. From our analysis of minority group students, it appears that proximity may be even more important to these students and their families in determining where they will go to college, or, in fact, if they will attend college at all.

Summary

Our analysis shows that, excepting for some minority group students, the self-concept of high school seniors and junior college graduates is positively associated with their parents' socioeconomic status (as measured by income). We also found that the more positive a student's self-image, the more likely he is to have "long-range" educational plans. High school graduates can be divided into three categories: by self-concept and plans those who plan no further formal education after high school; those who plan to get vocational training after high school or complete their education with a junior college degree; and those who plan at least four years of college, regardless of whether or not this includes transferring from a two-year school. Data on junior college graduates show a similar pattern with respect to post junior college plans.

Our findings lend support to those studies which treat students' self-concept as an intervening mechanism--in this case intervening between students socioeconomic background and their future educational plans. In addition, we conclude that a selection process occurs whereby students with higher self-concepts proceed through the educational system while those with lower self-images select themselves out of the system.

This applies for minority group students as well. For example, the group of Black junior college graduates have as positive self-concepts as their classmates, despite that fact that their families' incomes are low in comparison to the parental income of other students' families.

With a few interesting exceptions, we found no evidence to suggest that the self-concept of high school or junior college students is significantly related to the kind of "extra curricula" college activities which they choose to pursue. High school seniors with positive self-concepts, having interests in social activities and collegiate sports, appear more likely to choose four year universities. Students with positive self-images and interest in business related careers more often choose local junior colleges.

The demand for local two year colleges does not decrease as family income rises for Black and Spanish-speaking students. Despite the fact that the parental income of Spanish-speaking students is not significantly different from other students, Spanish-speaking students are overrepresented among those interested in attending the comparatively expensive University of Miami. Our analysis suggests that Miami's close proximity to these students' ethnic neighborhood and to the campus they currently attend is an important factor in explaining this phenomenon. Proximity also accounts for the choice of a majority of Black junior college graduates who prefer to attend local colleges and universities.

The authors conclude that research could be profitably undertaken to further examine the relationship between the self-concept of high school-age students and their educational plans and careers. Much of the

educational research on self-concept has examined either the developmental aspects of this phenomenon (during early school years) or the effects different types of classroom environments have upon self-concept. In other words, students' self-concept has most frequently been viewed as a dependent variable. The analysis presented here supports a recent body of literature which argues that, as students mature, self-concept is best viewed as an intervening mechanism. Further, within certain student sub-groups, it appears that the understanding of the determination of educational plans could be considerably furthered by the examination of self-concept as an independent variable.

TABLE I

MEAN SELF-CONCEPT SCORE BY PARENTAL INCOME

		Less than $3000	$3000 to $5000	$5000 to $10000	$10000 to $15000	$15000 to $20000	More than $20000
High School Respondents	Mean	13.62	14.25	14.79	14.84	15.07	15.05
	No. of Respondents	85	186	480	524	283	287
Junior College Respondents	Mean	15.19	15.54	15.65	16.04	16.06	16.32
	No. of Respondents	62	82	274	171	81	69

TABLE II

EDUCATIONAL PLANS BY MEAN SELF-CONCEPT SCORE

		Educational Plans						
		Drop Out H.S.	Finish H.S. & Stop	H.S. & Voc. School	J.C. & Stop	J.C. & Sr. Univ.	J.C. & 4 Yr. College	Direct from H.S. to 4 Yr. College
High School Respondents	Self-Concept Mean Score	14.02	14.18	14.85	15.33	15.68	16.05	16.25
	No. of Respondents	168	11	164	234	305	209	418
Junior College Respondents	Self-Concept Mean Score	---	---	---	16.06	17.08	16.84	---
	No. of Respondents	---	---	---	120	161	504	---

TABLE III

PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS WITH GIVEN SELF-CONCEPT TOTAL SCORES

	Self-Concept Total Scores															
	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Mean*
Percentage of H. School Students	.41	.57	1.35	2.36	3.34	4.57	6.44	9.09	11.37	14.47	12.68	11.62	9.46	4.93	2.65	14.78
Percentage of Jr. Col. Students	.00	.00	.56	.89	2.78	3.22	4.44	7.44	10.00	11.78	12.89	15.56	13.33	8.11	8.11	15.84

* $t_{3234}=9.64$; $P<.001$ (difference between means)

TABLE IV

STUDENTS' CHOSEN COLLEGE ACTIVITIES BY MEAN SELF-CONCEPT SCORE

		College Activities Respondent Interested In					
		Social Activities	Spec. Int. Clubs	Pol. Clubs Or Act.	Act. concerning Future Career	Sports	Getting To Know Other People
High School Respondents	Mean	16.29	15.99	15.76	14.64	16.09	15.80
	No. of Respon.	276	187	58	223	379	65
Junior College Respondents	Mean	15.56	16.02	16.49	16.54	15.63	15.20
	No. of Respon.	104	166	33	57	107	30

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TABLE V

MEAN SELF-CONCEPT BY FIRST CHOICE COLLEGE AND MINORITY GROUP MEMBERSHIP

I. High School Respondents

		Respondents Selecting Local J.C. as First Choice	Repondents Selecting Local 4-Year College as First Choice	Respondents Selecting Non-Local In-State College as First Choice
Black Respondents	Mean	14.31(1)*	14.60(2)	15.13(3)
	No. of Respond.	129	15	63
Spanish Respondents	Mean	14.06(4)	14.41(5)	14.53(6)
	No. of Respond.	169	20	17

II. Junior College Respondents

		Respondents Selecting Local 4-Year College as First Choice	Respondents Selecting Non-Local In-State College as First Choice
Black Respondents	Mean	14.81(7)	15.22(8)
	No. of Respond.	26	9
Spanish	Mean	15.56(9)	16.12(10)
	No. of Respond.	85	40

t tests*

Mean 1 and 3 $p<.05$
Mean 4 and 6 $p<.05$
Mean 9 and 10 $p<.05$
Mean 7 and 8 $p<.05$

NOTES

1. For a discussion of this position see Muzafer Sherif, "Self-Concept," in International Encyclopedia of The Social Sciences, Vol. 14, MacMillan and Free Press, 1968.

2. Some of this literature is discussed, with particular emphasis upon the inequality of educational opportunities in William H. Sewell, "Inequality of Opportunity for Higher Education," American Sociological Review 36 (October, 1971), pp. 793-809.

3. Talcott Parsons, "The Position of Identity in the General Theory of Action," in Chad Gordon and Kenneth Gergen, (eds.), The Self in Social Interaction, New York: John Wiley, 1968, pp. 11-23.

4. Morris Rosenberg, Society and the Adolescent Self-Image, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965, Chapters 10-12.

5. Wilbur Brookover, et. al., Self-Concept of Achievement and School Ability, East Lansing, Michigan: Bureau of Educational Services, 1965.

6. James S. Coleman, et. al., Equality of Educational Opportunity, Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1966, Chapters 3 and 4.

7. Leonard S. Cottrell, "Interpersonal Interaction and the Development of the Self," pp. 543-570 in David Goslin (ed.), Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research, Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969.

8. These are the same scale items first used in The American Voter survey. Angus Campbell, The American Voter, New York: John Wiley, 1960. For a discussion of the scale's subsequent use see J. P. Robinson, et. al., Measures of Political Attitudes, Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, 1968, pp. 649-660.

9. An item analysis revealed that two of the seven scale items had less than satisifactory (.05) alpha levels. These two items were omitted in order to maximized internal consistency and reliability. The resulting five item scale, based on one through four rational weights, is used in all our analyses. The scale has a range from 0 - 20, from lowest self-concept to highest self-concept.

10. The .05 level of significance is used throughout. The significance of observed differences between means was tested using the t test for differences between means.

11. This analysis has interesting implications for those systems of higher education that are considering or developing second two-year undergraduate universities ("senior universities"). Florida is a forerunner

in this respect; a major senior university is scheduled to open in metropolitan Miami in the fall of 1972. Students in the survey who plan to attend a senior university after junior college do not differ, in terms of self-concept, from those who plan to transfer to a four year university. These students have significantly higher self-concepts than their counterparts who plan no further education beyond junior college.

12. Whereas there is considerable evidence of changes in self-concept in the early school years, for example see P. P. Yeatts, Developmental Changes in Self-Concept of Children Grades 3 - 12, Gainesville: Florida Educational Research and Development Council, 1967, pp. 19-37, little evidence is available to show that, beyond the early years, additional years of schooling changes self-concept to a significant degree. Campbell, op. cit., pp. 518-519, does disagree with this position, but he does so from data collected after individuals had completed their education and without reference to educational plans.

13. James W. Trent and Leland L. Medsker, Beyond High School, Berkeley: Center for Research and Development in Higher Education, 1967, pp. 317-318.

14. In other analysis of the Miami-Dade student data, it has been again demonstrated that self-concept is best conceptualized as an intervening variable; when family SES was introduced as a control, self-concept no longer appeared significant.

15. We examined the relationship between self-concept and the choice of college subject major. No significant differences appeared between mean self-concept scores of six categories of subject majors (general liberal studies; education; business; technology; health and allied sciences; and hotel and food services). Therefore, we tentatively conclude that self-concept is not directly related to the choice of a college major.

16. The high school sample contained relatively large and approximately equal numbers of Black and Spanish-speaking students. Together they comprised about 30 percent of the respondents. Seventeen (17) percent of the junior college graduates were Spanish-speaking students. Despite the relatively sizeable Black population in Dade County, only five percent of the junior college graduates are Black.

17. Local colleges that do not require competitive entrance examinations are most attractive to students with lower self-concepts. Students with higher self-concepts are more likely to choose a school away from home that requires a specified minimum score on a standardized examination. Virtually every student who chose to attend a non-local school, had to meet such a requirement. Exceedingly few students in the survey elected to attend a public community college other than the one located in Miami.

18. The reader should keep in mind that the numbers we are dealing with, in the case of Black college graduates, are small. There were only 53 Black respondents.

19. Black students are no more likely to hold jobs while attending college than the student population in general. Three out of four Black respondents were employed; the same proportion of all graduating students were employed. This does not preclude the possibility that the perceived necessity of continued employment is higher among these students.